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MEMOIR
OF
AUSTIN FLINT, M.D., LL.D.

BY
A. JACOBI, M.D.
PRESIDENT OF THE NEW YORK ACADEMY OF MEDICINE

Reprinted from THE MEDICAL RECORD, April 24, 1886



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THE life of Dr. Austin Flint, one of my most distinguished predecessors in the presidency of the New York Academy of Medicine, was singularly fortunate. We may say that now that he has passed away, and avoided the dangers incident upon any human existence, which made the Greek philosopher exclaim that nobody must be called fortunate before he died. His birth, his life, and finally his sudden and painless death are peculiarly happy.

In the year 1638 Thomas Flint emigrated from Derbyshire, England, to Concord, Mass. Thus the family, of Puritan stock, is one of the oldest of the country. Austin Flint's father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were physicians in Massachusetts. Thus both the number of ancestors, and their labors and culture, constitute what even in this our country we may claim as genuine aristocracy.

This term I do not wish to be taken in anything like its usual European meaning. The aristocracy of the continent of Europe, hundreds of years ago, was com-

¹ Read before the New York Academy of Medicine, at the Stated Meeting, April 15, 1886.

posed of the men who spent their days in idleness, robbery, and violence. Their right consisted in the strength of their swords and the elasticity of their consciences. It required the invention of powder and guns to make their castles useless, change the hitherto unprotected into dangerous adversaries, and thus render the aristocrat virtuous. This compulsory virtue changed them into willing servants of the princes, whom they obeyed, either on the battlefields or in the waiting-rooms. They and their offspring, unless they have consented to take part in the physical or intellectual labors of the world, have contributed nothing to the development of morals and culture.

This is not what we may designate aristocracy in America. Our country has the advantage of not suffering from the evil inheritance of the mediæval period. What it has grown into being, it has become by hard work both of hands and brains. That kind of aristocratic family was the one Austin Flint hailed from; in it he might well have rejoiced, though pride would never be pardonable in anything accidental and not accomplished by one's own efforts.

With such hereditary advantages he was born in Petersham, Mass., on October 20, 1812. They were followed by those resulting from a liberal education in Amherst, and in Harvard, where he graduated in medicine in 1833. Since that time, without any interruption, he has been in the practice of his profession, adding to the daily practical labors much and varied literary work, and for the last forty years constant services as a teacher of medicine in six different colleges.

In Northampton and Boston he practised three years, until he moved to Buffalo, N. Y., in 1836. Here he resided sixteen years, with the intermission of a short period in 1844, in which he taught clinical medicine in Rush Medical College, Chicago. He founded the *Buffalo Medical Journal* in 1846, and edited it through a course of ten years; he organized, in connection with Frank H. Hamilton and James P. White, the Buffalo Medical Col-

lege, in 1847, but left Buffalo in 1852 to take charge of the chair of clinical medicine in the University of Louisville. Thence he returned to Buffalo in 1856, spent the winters of from 1858 to 1861 in New Orleans, teaching medicine and attending Charity Hospital, and settled in New York in 1859. His position as the teacher of clinical medicine in the Long Island Medical College he resigned in 1868; the same chair in the Bellevue Hospital Medical College he retained to his end. Its last Commencement took place while he lay dead in his house, and a day before he was carried to his last silent home.

As a teacher he was eminently successful. Thousands of the present practitioners of the United States were his pupils; there is no county but has those who listened to his lectures; and there is none but who gratefully remembers the breadth of his knowledge, and the systematic clearness and elegant simplicity of his diction.

Whoever has not listened to him in the lecture-room has made his acquaintance by his writings. For forty years he has contributed largely and worthily to the medical literature of the country. Many of his first papers appeared in the *Buffalo Medical Journal*, which owed the high regard in which it was held mainly to his contributions. From 1848 to 1850 he published articles on diabetes, the pathology of typhoid fever, on the epidemic of cholera in Buffalo, on serous effusions into the arachnoid cavity, on pleuro-pneumonitis complicated with pericarditis, and on fifty-two cases of typhoid fever. These essays were followed, in 1852, by clinical reports on continued fever and on variations of pitch in percussion and respiratory sounds, and their application to physical diagnosis; in 1853, by clinical reports on dysentery, and on chronic pleurisy; by (1856) his physical exploration of the chest and the diagnosis of diseases affecting the respiratory organs, and (1859) his practical treatise on the diagnosis, pathology, and treatment of diseases of the heart. In 1865 he wrote his compendium of percussion and auscultation, and of the physical diagnosis of diseases

affecting the lungs and heart ; and finally, in 1866, his treatise on the principles and practice of medicine.

It is not necessary to enumerate his many essays and papers, before and after that time. The publications of the United States Sanitary Commission, and the better journals of the country, bear evidence of his ever increasing experience, willingness to contribute to the common stock of knowledge, and the eagerness of the journals to print his papers.

His literary reputation was deservedly a very great one. Some of his works have been translated ; his treatise had an immense sale. The method and mode of his writing is characteristic and instructive ; if some of the modern writers would imitate him, it would be better for them and for literature. It is apparent that for many years he wrote nothing but clinical reports and studies. They were papers replete with careful observations plainly described, with their immediate results. These were followed, when his experience grew and his judgment became matured, by monographs on special subjects. He was fifty years old, and already a celebrity, when he published a treatise on the whole subject of internal medicine. It was the work of a man who had given two dozen years and more to the study of his subjects before venturing before the profession with his great book. Let the young manufacturers of text-books of nowadays, who collate the pigeon-holed pilferings from the older books of better men into a volume, and try to build up a reputation with its hoped-for pecuniary advantages, learn from Austin Flint the period of life in which a man may be expected to write a text-book for the use of either the student or the physician.

In his writings nobody ever was more straightforward and honest. What he did not know he would not state. When he felt that the latest editions of his text-book could be made more scientific and serviceable by elaborating the pathological anatomy of his themes, he selected William H. Welch to write the required chapters,

and gave him full credit for his work in his preface. As he was modest in his writings, so he was in discussions. He was always as anxious to be taught as capable to instruct. Some may remember a discussion on pepsin in the American Medical Association, many years ago. When, the next day, he received a note from one of those present, in which the necessity was urged to add muriatic acid to the doses of pepsin he had advised, he called in person to express his appreciation of the, then new, suggestion and the letter containing it. There was, however, one thing he was jealous of, viz., the honor of his country. When, in a discussion, he once complained of the oblivion of Carr's name in connection with the causation of the crepitant râle, and the pre-eminence attributed to foreign authors in regard to the explanation of respiratory sounds, he was rejoiced and proud when he was shown the page on which Winterich gives full credit to the American practitioner. Vanity and exalted opinion of himself were not his faults. He would never have accepted the eulogistic exaggeration proclaimed in a recent obituary, in which it is claimed that nobody in this century has done so much as he, or more than he, for the diseases of the respiratory organs. He would have urged that friendship and esteem must never go so far as to obscure the names of Laennec, the Frenchman, Skoda, the Austrian, and Stokes, the Briton.

Still, he was original in many things. His discussions on pitch and resonance will always be read with pleasure and profit. Though we owe him no great discoveries, we and our successors shall always admire his clear way of dealing with known facts and new observations, and of popularizing for the medical mind the latest evolutions of medical thought and the most mature fruit of scientific research.

The peculiar qualities displayed by Austin Flint the writer he would also exhibit as a teacher, both didactic and clinical. He taught general medicine, and preferred to study, and give particular attention to, the diseases of

the systems of respiration and circulation. He was clear, painstaking, and accurate. He occupied a chair in which there are, to the average student, no amazing features or feats. The student who applauds when a bone is sawed through, or a spouting artery is caught by a dexterous hand, or the actual cautery sends fumes and odor through the amphitheatre, is quite apt to gaze with sleepy indifference at the master whose lips utter the finest points of a difficult diagnosis, or whose brain is exercised over the greatest intricacies of pathological physiology. In the teachings and the daily work of the practitioner there is rarely anything surprising, amazing, or brilliant. In spite of that, it did not take long for Austin Flint to make a great and ever-increasing reputation as a teacher. Let our young men never forget, and let them learn from the example of the illustrious dead teacher, that a good preliminary education, systematic work, earnestness, and solidity are the corner-stones on which alone a teacher and an author can build up a name worthy to be enjoyed and capable of being handed down to posterity. What Flint's importance as a teacher has been, and will be, can be best proven by his thousands of pupils. Still, even as fortunate and successful a man as he was has his disappointments and curtailments. One ambition of his life was never fulfilled.

Look at this fact: At the meeting of the American Medical Convention, since called Association, at New York, on May 5, 1846, he was appointed on a committee to report on a resolution offered by Dr. Isaac Hays, for a uniform and elevated standard of requirements for the degree of M.D. in all the medical schools of the United States. The report is signed by R. W. Haxall Chairman, and can be found on pp. 63-77 of the, "Proceedings of the National Medical Conventions, held in New York, May, 1846, and in Philadelphia, 1847" (Phil., 1847). The very first of the ten resolutions embodied in that report is this: "That it be recommended to all the colleges to extend the period employed in lec-

turing from four to six months." And it is true what a late number of a journal¹ says: "That that report is still to-day a most interesting, applicable, and valuable document." But alas! the slowness of spontaneous evolution, and the predominance of circumstances, and the weight of impediments are such as to cripple even a strong man like Austin Flint, who, though his life was spared long, never saw the hopes of his younger years fulfilled.

His successes as an author and a teacher were equalled by those accomplished in his consulting practice. In those special branches to which he had given so much of his time and attention, his counsel was frequently requested. No matter whether he had anything new to say, or had only to confirm the diagnosis or fortify the position of the practitioner, everybody here knows that he was always kind, mild, and modest. There is nobody here but has often either admired his superior knowledge and experience, or blessed his pleasing demeanor and generous words. He was an eminently just man and, for that reason, could afford to be mild and generous.

These qualities he exhibited in a period which has been a critical one in the development of the last few years in the life of the medical profession. During the first successful year of preparations for the International Congress he was true to the *bona fides* entered upon in Copenhagen. From the very beginning he was, like all the greatest and wisest men in the profession of both this country and Europe, earnest in excluding medico-political differences and difficulties from the organization of the Congress. In regard to the latter there was to him no Code question at all. I have good reason to believe that the demoralization and disorder in the ranks of the profession, growing out of these differences, caused him the greatest possible pain, and many of the most unhappy days of his life. It is a great satisfaction, however, to know that everybody

¹ Journ. of the Am. Med. Assn., March 27th.

wished to distinguish and honor the man who had served the profession half a century, to his credit and to the advantage of his fellows.

In regard to important moral and ethical questions, it is of graver import to study a man's own words than to listen to what others would wish us to believe ; and when that man is Austin Flint, that mode of inquiry is still more indicated. Not that the Code question is so grave as some would have it. Indeed, it has begun already to have a historical interest only.

But some time ago everybody took sides in regard to the Code question. So did you, so did I, so did Austin Flint. But to belong to a party does not mean to be an offensive partisan. And if ever a party man—so I believe—was impartial, that man was, or tried to be, Austin Flint, whom we honor as much for his words as his actions. When a man works himself up into celebrity, his memory must serve the surviving as did his life. His opinions ought to be learned from his own papers published in the *New York Journal*.¹ Read them as if he were still among you. He is among you. For those who have lived a life worth living do not die. I am willing to abide by the platform laid out in those essays. They contain the same thoughts expressed by your presiding officer in an address delivered from this place on October 1, 1885. Two days afterward that address appeared in print. Two days after its publication I received from the great and good man who is now gone a letter which I shall be proud of preserving as a legacy. I hold in my hand this note of Austin Flint's, which begins with the words : "I have read your address with pleasure"—and finishes with these : "How beautiful, lovely, and salutary it is to promote peace, harmony, and brotherhood."

On the evening of his inauguration as President of the Academy, in 1871, his predecessor, one of the most illus-

¹ April, 1883. Also in his Presidential Address of 1884.

trious types of American erudition and versatility, Edmund Peaslee, had a right to say to him: "We have always found you the high-minded and sympathetic man, and the genial gentleman, as well as the finished scholar, the distinguished author, and the skilful practitioner."

All that he proved during his presidential term which extended over the two years, from 1871 to 1873. The routine work performed during that time did not differ much from that of many other years or terms, but some of the papers were of unusual excellence. It would be improper to go into the merits of the essays read and discussed. They were by Allen S. Church, Charles A. Leale, William Detmold, Alfred A. Loomis, Samuel S. Purple, Charles P. Russell, Gouverneur M. Smith, J. Lewis Smith, Frank P. Foster, Gurdon Buck, Ernst Krackowizer, J. C. Dalton, Lewis A. Sayre, E. C. Seguin, Salvatore Caro, and Allan McLane Hamilton.

Flint's contributions to the scientific work of the Academy were not numerous, but their character was high. Amongst others, "The Management of Pulmonary Tuberculosis, with Special Reference to the Employment of Alcoholic Stimulants," June 3, 1863 ("Trans.," ii., p. 353); "Discussion of Dr. Leaming's Paper on Pleuritis," March 17, 1870 ("Bulletin," iv., p. 48); "Discussion on the Etiology and Pathology of Bright's Disease," October 1, 1862 ("Bulletin," vol. ii., p. 1); "Discussion on Dr. Loomis' Paper on Typhus Fever," February 15, 1865 ("Bulletin," ii., p. 388); "Last Illness of Valentine Mott, M.D.," May 3, 1865 ("Bulletin," ii., p. 434), will always be referred to with sincere pleasure.

His membership in the Academy ceased a few weeks before March 13th, on which he breathed his last. You remember the universal reluctance on the part of those present to accept his resignation, and the silence with which the remarks of the presiding officer were listened to. *Malevolence only could misconstrue, and has misconstrued, into their opposite, his words of appreciation and regret.* There is one great gratification even in that

resignation of his. His good will toward the Academy is best exhibited by his staying as long as he did, under rather peculiar circumstances, and moreover we shall know, by the gift of his library which he bequeathed to the Academy, that the latter was dear to his heart. For the Academy not to speak words of praise and remembrance in behalf of his memory, in this hall which he graced and in which he taught, in spite of suggestions and even demands to the contrary, of a personal character; not to keep his memory green among us, is an impossibility. As it is for us, so for the medical men of the country. His name and reputation form part of the history of our profession, and this Academy means to honor its dead who have gone into history.

In listening to or reading the eulogies of the dead, I have often been struck with the well-meant, but still obtrusive, exaggerations of their characters and services. It then appeared to me that the writer buried the memory of the friend under an oppressive weight of high-strung flatteries. It reminded me of the manner in which an inconvenient beggar is forever cast aside by buying him off with a large sum. That plan may do well enough for the mediocre, who never excelled, and therefore is extolled for once. But if there be any among us who rise above mediocrity and average, or those even whose intellectual stature fills a large space between the soil on which their feet walk, and the skies to which their brows are turned, let them, while they live, harbor the ambition, or when they are dead, enjoy the honor of serving mankind even after and through their very deaths. To accomplish that, let the truth be stated, and the truth only. Thus it was the truth only I aimed at in this brief sketch. As its object was great, I found it an easy task to omit the trite platitudes of a commonplace eulogy.

Austin Flint had great advantages, and developed and utilized them for the benefit of the many. Born with an enviable inheritance, he enjoyed a thorough general and special education. He had great physical endurance

and uniform health, an imposing presence, pleasant manners, and an equable temperament. With physical and intellectual powers he combined indefatigable love of work, which he performed systematically and energetically. He was a thoroughly modest man, who knew how difficult it is to master the depths of knowledge ; thus he had an unusual degree of common sense, which limits aspirations and aims. Thus he became thorough in what he undertook to practise and teach. Thus he was successful in practice and enjoyed the confidence of both the profession and public. As a teacher he is remembered by thousands ; his pupils loved him and his colleagues honored him. His writings obtained for him a national and international reputation. There was no place of honor in the possession of the profession of the city, State, or country, which he has not filled. The profession of Europe was anxious to show its respect for him. Thus he lived and worked to an advanced age, disturbed by but few symptoms of evanescing powers, and when the time came he ceased to labor and live on the very same day.

As a profession, let us hope that we shall have many like him.

